

Editorial

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The opinion of The Arizona Republic

GOOD INTENTIONS MASK MANY UNCERTAINTIES

Power plant at Big Sandy site too risky

The Big Sandy River is one of Arizona's rare green jewels, a mix of cottonwood and willows in the desert.

You know the spot, if you've ever driven to Las Vegas and crossed the dramatic gorge, bridged by U.S. 93, near Wikieup.

Such riparian areas are the state's richest wildlife habitat, but 90 percent are damaged or gone forever. Now a proposed power plant is putting the Big Sandy at risk.

And the risk is too great.

That was the decision of the Arizona Power Plant and Transmission Line Siting Committee in September. The committee voted 8-1 against Caithness Energy's plan for a generating plant near Wikieup.

The Arizona Corporation Commission should follow suit when it votes on Caithness' appeal of the Siting Committee's decision.

This plant does not make sense in this spot.

To support its case, Caithness argues that Arizona needs the power, the land could otherwise be put to more harmful uses, a mitigation plan would protect the Big Sandy, and improprieties in the siting committee process prevented it from getting a fair hearing.

None of these arguments hold water.



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The Big Sandy Energy Project could threaten some of the state's richest habitat and the home of the Southwestern willow flycatcher.

■ Plenty of power plants have already been approved to meet Arizona's energy needs for years. As a merchant power plant, the Caithness facility would sell electricity around the West, rather than furnishing part of the regular energy supply for an Arizona utility.

■ The decision should be based on the merits of the plant itself, not some hypothetical future use of the land. Otherwise, as the Corporation Commission's own staff

pointed out, the state would be hostage to landowners who threatened to do something worse with their property.

■ There are too many unknowns to ensure that the riparian area would stay healthy if a power plant were built. The facility would pump water from a deep aquifer, but the hydrology of the area is not well understood. Computer models show that the marsh by the Big Sandy, critical for wildlife, would be affected, but no one knows how much. The pumping might eventually dry up the marsh completely and shrink the river south of it.

Caithness says a contract with the Arizona Department of Water Resources, which it is negotiating, will protect the Big Sandy. The company would end irrigation rights on nearby land and, if necessary, pump water out of the aquifer and into the marsh. The state could even shut down the plant if nothing else worked.

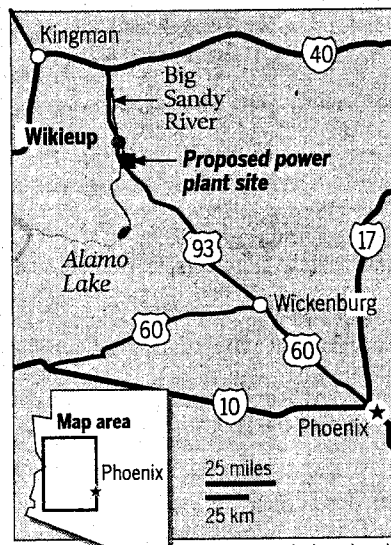
Despite good intentions, this plan is full of uncertainties, including whether the water would have to be treated before being put in the marsh. It also has to work for the life-span of a plant that could operate for four decades, possibly with changes in ownership.

Under a draft of the contract, Caithness would be off the hook in case of drought, when pumping would have its greatest impact. Its responsibilities could also be reduced by the actions of other water users. And it's hard to imagine that the state would unhesitatingly pull the plug on a power plant that's up and running.

■ Corporation Commission staff, Chairman Bill Mundell and Commissioner Marc Spitzer all say they went through the record and found no evidence of any impropriety in the proceedings. In its

Proposed plant threatens area

Building a power plant on a bank of the Big Sandy River would threaten riparian area rich in wildlife.



Jo Anne Izumi/
The Arizona Republic

filings, Caithness accused one committee member of "bias and unprofessionalism" and unduly influencing other members. This is more than grasping at a legal straw; it is an unwarranted attack on a committee that gets no pay for a difficult, important task.

As a further complication, the Hualapai Tribe intends to sue to block the plant, saying that Caithness has not adequately addressed its water rights and concerns that burial sites could be disturbed.

The Line Siting Committee is hardly a pushover for opponents of power plants. Before denying the Caithness project, it had approved 10 similar plants in recent months.

Corporation Commission staff found that substantial evidence supported the committee's decision. There is no reason for the commissioners to decide otherwise.

For another perspective on the proposed Big Sandy Energy Project, see Donald Paul Hodel's "My Turn" column on today's Opinions page.